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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are offered for developing teaching and learning centers or faculty support programs to improve college teaching. Suggestions include: develop a faculty partnership, be discipline specific, allow time for divergence, offer variety, provide a smorgasbord, focus on both planning and teaching, translate research findings into classroom applications, read and share the current literature, use "draft" form when distributing documents about plans for teaching improvements or principles of teaching and learning, use technology, and provide opportunities for professional growth. (JDD)

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IMPROVING COLLEGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Helping Teaching and Learning Centers Improve Teaching

How can NCRIPTAL research be used to improve teaching?

What does NCRIPTAL research tell us about how to develop teaching and learning centers for faculty?

Does this research have implications for faculty development?

These questions come up repeatedly whenever NCRIPTAL researchers talk to faculty around the country. Although they are phrased in different ways, the meanings are similar: Faculty and administrators want to know how research on higher education will guide them in improving teaching.

A study recently completed by NCRIPTAL's curriculum research team shows that faculty who are teaching introductory courses in different fields have different beliefs about education, organize the presentation of material in courses differently, and are affected by different influences. Within each academic discipline, however, faculty hold suprisingly consistent views, regardless of the type of institution in which they teach.

This study of influences on course planning also indicates that faculty are not very likely to use teaching and learning centers or other resources that may help them improve their course designs. Because of the current high interest in improving teaching among faculty, you have to ask whether faculty fail to use resources for teaching improvement at their colleges because of a general discomfort with seeking assistance or because the resources available may not meet their particular needs. The fact that faculty say they do turn to their colleagues, and even their families, for help in planning their courses has led us to develop suggestions that may be useful to those who are developing teaching and learning centers or faculty support programs. While these suggestions have not been tested empirically, they fit our experience and the results of related research projects currently underway.

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Suggestions for Improving Teaching and Learning Centers

1. Develop a faculty partnership.

Plans for improving teaching and learning should be guided by faculty members whether the objective is to establish an informal support group, to build a collegewide program, or to establish a physical site that serves as a center for faculty development. Include faculty from as many disciplines as possible, even if some of them are only involved part time. Committees should include as many disciplinary viewpoints as possible.

2. Be discipline specific.

NCRIPTAL's research shows that faculty are guided more by discipline in their teaching than by any other factor, including the type of institution in which they teach. Research must be adapted for each discipline to accommodate these differences. For example, methods developed for the sciences most typically are structured and hierarchical in nature; in literature, methods focus more often on individual student needs than on discipline concepts.

3. Allow time for divergence.

Rather than immediately attacking the business at hand, begin by encouraging faculty members to share their disciplinary points of view and to understand how and why they differ. Discussing the purposes of education and how they influence course structure may help to avoid arguments later.

4. Offer variety.

Because disciplines vary so greatly in their approaches to teaching, a single approach to improving teaching and learning is unlikely to succeed with faculty from different fields. A generalist in a teaching and learning center must offer appropriate choices.

5. Provide a smorgasboard.

Faculty differ by discipline not only in how they teach but in their basic educational beliefs. It is unlikely that one teaching "tip" will be suitable for all. As intelligent decision makers, faculty will want a list of alternatives from which they can choose. Options allow faculty to adapt their own disciplines as well as to maintain autonomy.

6. Focus on both planning and teaching.

Teaching occurs in the classroom, but, to be effective, it must be planned first. Teaching activities differ substantially from planning activities. If teaching is to be improved, the focus must be on the teacher as planner as well as on the teacher as performer.

7. Prepare translators.

Someone needs to take the research that appears in educational journals and translate it for classroom use in each discipline. Researchers often expect the results of their studies to speak for themselves and fail to suggest practical applications for their findings. Translation is best done at the campus level where the research can be adapted for particular students, faculty, and settings.

8. Read and share the current literature.

To know what advances may help improve teaching and learning, a center staff member, preferably a faculty member, should keep current with the literature about research on teaching and learning. This person should then have a way to share findings with other faculty, whether through organizing a small library for this purpose, writing for a faculty newsletter, or giving seminars on the topic.

9. Use DRAFT form.

When distributing documents about plans for teaching improvement programs or about principles of teaching and learning, clearly

mark the document as a draft. Encourage reactions, suggestions, and opinions from faculty. This makes the material seem less prescriptive and gives faculty a chance to add their own ideas, thus promoting ownership of plans and activities.

10. Use technology.

If technology is accessible and acceptable to the majority of your faculty, consider the possibilities of using it. Computers, electronic mail, and coding machines all present new teaching possibilities. But keep in mind those who are still technophobes—don't structure an entire program around technology or otherwise force it on reluctant faculty.

11. Provide opportunities for professional growth.

An adequate travel budget encourages faculty to attend conferences about teaching in general as well as conferences about their own disciplines. As their emphasis on teaching and learning becomes more co-equal with the emphasis on their disciplines, colleges must provide funding that makes participation in both activities possible.

These recommendations do not represent a complete formula for success in building teaching and learning centers for faculty. What they do reflect is the collected wisdom of researchers and faculty about how to affect the teaching process. If they serve as a discussion point for those who are working to improve the work of faculty, then their purpose will have been served.

— Michele Genthon

This **Accent** is based on the research of Joan S. Stark and the staff of NCRIPTAL's research program onCurriculum Design Influences and Impacts

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